

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE TURKS AND THE CHRISTIANS

1453 and about 1500

Bertrandon de La Brocquière and Sultan Bayezid II

From the 14th century through the 16th century, the Ottoman Turks expanded their empire from Anatolia (present-day Turkey) all the way to Central Europe. During this great expansion, war and trade brought together two very different cultures—Islamic and Christian. In the first of the following selections, a French traveler gives his impressions of the Turks. In the second selection, a Turkish sultan offers his views of the Christians as he rallies his officers to meet the threat of European invasion.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Contrasting

A writer's attitude toward his subject is referred to as tone. Describe and contrast the tone in these two selections.

A French View of the Turks

They are a tolerably handsome race, with long beards, but of moderate size and strength. I know well that it is a common expression to say 'as strong as a Turk', nevertheless I have seen an infinity of Christians excel them when strength was necessary, and I myself, who am not of the strongest make, when circumstances required labour, found very many Turks weaker than I.

They are diligent, willingly rise early, and live on little, being satisfied with bread badly baked, raw meat dried in the sun, milk curdled or not, honey, cheese, grapes, fruit, herbs, and even a handful of flour with which they make a soup sufficient to feed six or eight for a day. Should they have a horse or camel sick without hope of recovery, they cut its throat and eat it. They are indifferent as to where they sleep and usually lie on the ground. Their dress consists of two or three cotton garments, thrown one over the other, which fall to their feet. Over these again they wear a mantle of felt, called a *capinat*. This, though light, resists rain, and some *capinats* are very handsome. Their boots come up to their knees and they wear side drawers, some of crimson velvet, others of silk or fustian and common stuffs. In war, or when travelling, to avoid being embarrassed by their gowns, they tuck the ends into their drawers, that they may move with greater freedom.

Their horses are good, cost little in food, gallop well and for a long time. They keep them on short allowances, never feeding them but at night and then giving

them only five or six handfuls of barley with double the quantity of chopped straw, the whole put into a bag which hangs from the horse's ears.

It is the policy of the Turks to have their armies twice as numerous as those of the Christians. This superiority of numbers augments courage and allows them to form different corps, and to make their attacks on various parts at the same time. Should they once force an opening, they rush through in incredible crowds, and it is then a miracle if all be not lost . . . The Turkish lances are worth nothing: their archers are the best troops they have, and these do not shoot so strongly nor so far as ours. They have a more numerous cavalry, and their horses, though inferior in strength to ours and incapable of carrying such heavy weights, gallop better and skirmish for a longer time without losing their wind.

I must own that in my various experiences I have always found the Turks frank and loyal, and when it was necessary to show courage, they have never failed . . . Their armies I know commonly consist of 200,000 men, but the greater part are on foot and destitute of wooden shields, helmets, mallets or swords. They have besides amongst them a great number of Christians who are forced to serve—Greeks, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Albanians, Slavonians, Wallachians, Serbians and other subjects of the despots of that country. All these people detest the Turk, because he holds them in a severe subjection; and should they see the Christians, and above all the French, march in force against the Sultan, I have not the slightest doubt but they would turn against him and do him great mischief.

A Turkish View of the Christians

You know well the unwashed Gyaours¹ and their ways and manners, which certainly are not fine. They are indolent, sleepy, easily shocked, inactive; they like to drink much and to eat much; in misfortunes they are impatient, and in times of good fortune proud and overbearing. They are lovers of repose and do not like to sleep without soft feather-beds; when they have no women with them they are sad and gloomy; and without plenty of good wine they are unable to keep counsel among themselves. They are ignorant of any military stratagems. They keep horses only to ride while hunting with their dogs; if one of them wishes to have a good war-horse, he sends to buy it from us. They are unable to bear hunger or cold, or heat, effort and menial work. They let women follow them in the campaigns, and at their dinners give them the upper places; and they want always to have warm dishes. In short, there is no good in them . . .

And then the Christians fight constantly among themselves, because everyone desires to be a king, or a prince, or the first amongst them. One says to another, "Brother, help thou me today against this Prince, and to-morrow I will help thee against that one." Fear them not, there is no concord amongst them. Everyone takes care of himself only; no one thinks of the common interest. They are quarrelsome, unruly, self-willed and disobedient. Obedience to their superiors and discipline they have none, and yet everything depends on that.

1. Gyaours: Christians

When they lose a battle they always say, “We were not well-prepared”; or, “This or that traitor has betrayed us”; or, “We were too few in number and the Turks were far more numerous”; or, “The Turks came upon us without previous declaration of war, by misleading representations and treachery. They have occupied our country by turning our internal difficulties to their own advantage.”

Well, that is what they say, being not willing to confess truly and rightly: “God is on the side of the Turks. It is God who helps them and therefore they conquer us.”

Sources: For Brocquière—Excerpt from *Early Travels in Palestine*, edited by Thomas Wright (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848). For Sultan Bayezid II—Excerpt from *Constantine, the Last Emperor of the Greeks* by Cedomilj Mijatovic (London: S. Low, Marston, 1892).